



The new studio addition, painted a custom red, seems like it has always been part of the timeless 1959 cottage.



grand | OPEN DOOR

A space of one's own

Art and life blend
cozily in this
midcentury
Sanibel cottage

Perhaps a successful abstract expressionist whose works are held in prominent collections, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, could imagine living in spacious digs overlooking the Gulf of Mexico. Perhaps on Sanibel Island. »

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Small artworks add a colorful vibe to Hollis Hollis' and Maureen Watson's understated cottage, much of it remaining in its original condition.





Top: Hollis unwinds in her artist's studio. • Above: "Telos II," 30" x 36", oil on canvas, 2015

Fort Myers native Hollis Jeffcoat and her partner, Maureen Watson, did the opposite: They shed their roomy Blind Pass house for a 1959 cottage in the island's tranquil West Rocks enclave off West Gulf Drive. "I love the character and feel of it," says Hollis, an oil painter. "We don't need a big house."

From the rear, the 1,300-square-foot cottage overlooks a small lake, originally a borrow pit, in the quaint community that has a mix of pil-ing and ground-level homes. Despite its location and age, Hollis and Watson are only the third owners of the three-bedroom, two-bathroom cottage—the first residence built in the neighborhood, though the only type of its kind remaining. "It's the first and the last," she says.

The living room walls are hung with small-scale works by artists they've known; there isn't space for large-scale pieces. The kitchen is a tight galley. "It's workable but it's limiting. We'll do something with it eventually but we will still maintain the character of the house," says Watson, owner of Watson MacRae Gallery on Sanibel. "We chose to live in a small cottage."

Size truly didn't matter; both women have lived in tiny spaces in tight urban centers. "It's not that bad, especially after you've lived in New York City," Hollis smiles. "It's really OK."

IN THE STUDIO

The cottage was almost paradise, except that it was missing one major amenity: a working art studio. Through a stroke of serendipity and word-of-mouth, they met Fort Myers architect Joyce Owens, FAIA. Owens set about creating a masterplan that included relocating the driveway, which originally ended at the front door. They added a wooden sundeck and courtyard, crushed-shell pathways and new landscaping. "It wasn't just the addition; it was looking at the whole property holistically," says Owens. The main focus was to seamlessly integrate the new addition with the existing cottage while working within stringent building code requirements.

The biggest issue, of course, was the studio. The 600-square-foot stand-alone studio was constructed to the left of the original home, connected by a wooden deck. Below is a carport. ►►

Inside, the smell of turpentine greets visitors to the high-ceiling space—appropriately spare with vast white walls. A main element in a professional painting space is light, and a rectilinear window high on the north-facing wall invites a continuous source of copious light, whether sunny or cloudy. A built-in rack system allows the tidy tucking of canvases; there is a bathroom and plenty of storage. “This studio is exactly what I need for size and feel,” Hollis says. “It’s what I consider the perfect studio.”

The project felt like a communal coming together. “They were such a great team to work with—open-minded, willing to listen, allowing me to make suggestions, allowing me to be an artist as well,” says Owens. The studio was built by Landl Construction, a long-running construction company owned by Sanibel residents Gus and Sue Landl. Taratino Brothers Carpentry did the finishing work; several of the guys had worked for Hollis’ brother 15 years ago. “We were sorry to see the construction crew go—that’s a first,” Hollis says.

Hollis, 63, doesn’t paint at an easel. She lays the canvas flat on the floor to execute her abstractions—a physically tedious process that has led to shoulder injuries and surgeries. To the rescue came islander Roddy West, who designed and built a pulley wall-hanging system that can lower works to the floor or draw them up to the wall. They fondly call it “Roddy’s Contraption” and hope to one day replace it with an aluminum, motorized version. “It has added juju from everyone who worked on it,” Hollis says.

The original cottage was peach. Watson suggested painting the addition red because it was a popular midcentury hue. She wanted a color that would accentuate the structure’s beauty but there was something more: “Henri Matisse, Hollis’ all-time favorite, did a famous painting called ‘The Red Studio,’” says Watson, 67. Hollis, an innate colorist, didn’t settle on an off-the-shelf red. She mixed hundreds of samples before settling on a maroon-ish shade that was custom-mixed.

Upon entering or leaving the studio, guests are invited to sign the white entry hall with an artist’s graphite pencil. The wall has been signed by all visitors, beginning with “the first person who walked in,” says Watson. “I thought it would be a fun idea, a remembrance of everyone who came. It makes people part of the studio and her work. Many are her collectors. It makes it more personal and human.”

When the studio was completed last year, Hollis’ first show at the Watson MacRae Gallery was titled “New Paintings from the Red Studio.” ▶▶





Clockwise from top left: Hollis and Gracie hang out on the deck that connects the main house with the art studio. • Wood-paneled walls, high ceilings and wooden floors uphold the cottage's rustic charm. • A hammock invites rest, with the community's small pond that Hollis calls Coquina Lake beyond. • A sun deck was built to create an outdoor space as part of the masterplan.



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ARTIST AT WORK

Teasing out her visions in rigorously selected colors in oil, Hollis' process is anything but simple. The third-generation Lee Countian told her first-grade class at Allen Park Elementary School that she intended to be a professional artist. "It was a knowing there was no question about. I don't know how I even knew you could be an artist or how you would do it." She's followed her first instincts on her sojourns at the New York Studio School to Paris, Montreal and back to the Big Apple.

It was in France when she was 24 that Hollis realized she has synesthesia, a neurological phenomenon in which the stimulation of one sense leads to the automatic, involuntary experience of another sense. Hollis learned of the condition during talks with mentor and gallery owner Joan Mitchell that devolved into small arguments about the color of a number or day of the week. Hollis would insist, for example, that the number three was orange. Mitchell explained that neither of them were right or wrong because not everyone associates colors to numbers and days. "I didn't know everyone didn't have

synesthesia," Hollis says.

She later realized that, for her, sounds are also colors. More specifically, a chord creates a mental image; a note, a color. "When I heard the osprey cry, it was a piercing in my heart. I wondered if I could paint what the sounds of the osprey evokes." (She did, in the 2014 piece "Sound of the Osprey.") "For the first time I was paying attention to how sounds make me create," she says. "That's when it became more fascinating and challenging. I feel like I'm on an abyss when I'm painting."

Hollis is a purist, working mostly in oils. She is "a true, third-generation abstract expressionist. She is a colorist, probably because of her synesthesia. She gets to the essence of the nature she is struck by. Her work is visually interesting, emotionally evocative and original," says Watson. "That's not easy to do."

After returning to her native roots, Hollis toyed with representational ideas and suggestions, incorporating forms of jellyfish, Gulf waters and mangroves into her pieces. "This is Sanibel, this is Southwest Florida, the essence of the life I love," she says. **G**



A professional artist for three decades, Hollis is thrilled with her art studio's space, light and tranquility. Hollis is a purist who works almost exclusively in oils. "It's what I consider the perfect studio," she says. • Far left: "Sound of the Osprey," 36" x 48", oil on canvas, 2014

